



A Beautiful Garden: Clearing Space for Healthy Growth

by Julie Kane — Marin Academy

Preface: I have just finished my third year of directing/teaching in a small dance department at the high school level. Previously I taught college and professional level students. I have come to realize huge differences in these venues and feel I have only just begun to scratch the surface of how to do it well. The previous dance director left an in tact program for me to follow which served me well except for when it did not. My job has been to make it mine.

My project goals were many: to create a syllabus - one with more weekly and monthly detail, to guide-post the dance binder (reflection tool) with specific dates/entry themes, to consider rehearsals (some weekend) and performances, and to weed out any assignments, projects, or class lessons that get in the way or “choke the garden.”

I set out to review everything that was already in place. Review existing syllabus, requirements, assignments, rehearsals, production schedule, and performances with an eye for spaciousness (ha!) and clarity. I felt that I gave too many handouts on the first day of school and thought that all this information could be organized in such a manner where 2-3 pages would be enough. A clear and concise expression of what will be expected and practiced. I also hoped to accomplish a clearer curriculum design. What I have now is fairly clear, but not crystal.

Did I do this? No, not really. I realized I bit off more than I could possibly chew in the 5 meetings that we had. I also realized that my goals did not fit into the Project Zero goals. I was not yet thinking in PZ terms, but they infused themselves as I began to understand them better. Nevertheless, I am closer to being able to view and comprehend all that we do in the dance department. I also have learned many PZ concepts and skills that inherently create more focus throughout the program. For instance, I am starting to incorporate my through-lines into more than journal assignments. They are now being used in dance reviews, and during in-class choreographic critiques. Eventually, I would like them to be like veins feeding the whole curriculum.

Part of the way I kept track of all that (grows in the garden) completes a year in the dance department was to make a binder that holds the curriculum for the three courses I teach - Dance I, Dance II, and Dance III/IV. In it are the syllabi, informational handouts, assignments, and examples of students work. This binder helped me to see all that is accomplished throughout the year. The reflection it has offered me is invaluable. Now I need to make decisions – weed some things out or just get more organized with all that exists so I/students feel the connections/transitions from one exercise/or assignment to the next.

After I realized that my goals were sort of running parallel to what PZ had to offer me, I got very direct with the program, and made my first rubric! (name PZ concept...) In the dance program, students are required to see 2 dance concerts per semester. They write a review for one and take notes concerning the elements of dance for the other. I have always accepted many different forms of this review and it was getting hard to grade fairly. I also learned that the assignment could jive more with the Through-lines, helping students to make deeper connections. The rubric day at PZ inspired me to create a rubric for this lesson. It is important

to me that dance students leave Marin Academy with the ability to articulate what they witness, prefer, and don't appreciate in dance performance. I want them to be able to decipher structure and design. I want them to comprehend how dancers use time/space/energy to communicate through the body and ultimately create their own dances - ones that speak to their audience. I eventually realized that it was important for me to have them address the through-lines in every assignment, in order to keep a comprehensive flow. Next year I will have students address one of the through-lines in each review.

The through-lines these years were: What moves you/What Is beautiful to you? What makes art feel alive? And, How does working/creating with others help us to understand ourselves? Upon review with my fellow fellows, one of them pointed out that I did not have a through-line for two things that she was seeing very present in my teaching goals. Those were, understanding or knowing the body better, and introduction to dance styles and history. "Ay! It's too much, but it is so important." So, yet another decision begs to be addressed.

Through all of this I felt like a slow learner. All the talking, all the listening, all the conversations, all the amazing ideas dancing in my head, I had to keep reminding myself that teaching is a creative process and you never quite know what you are doing or if what you are doing is reaching everyone. At the end of the year I was looking for some inspirational words to send off my seniors with, I found this in a book of Rumi poetry: Do you think I know what I'm doing? That for one breath or half-breath I belong to myself? As much as a pen knows what it's writing, or the ball can guess where it's going next.

I WANT MORE:

I want to create an assignment calendar:

- Improvisation
- choreographic assignment
- critique/reflect

- improv
- choreog assignmt
- critique/reflect
- 2nd draft

- improv
- chor assignt
- peform/critique
- 2nd draft
- perform/critiqe and 3rd draft

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